

Baptism and Desert

Where should one start to listen to Jesus? In a sense it doesn't matter so long as one starts. But the beatitudes are as good a place as any.

As I sit down in the presence of the Lord and open my heart to him I hear:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5:3-12)

Turning these words of the Lord over in my heart, taking them seriously, I begin to realize that even as I try to hear what the Lord is saying, I listen as an outsider. I don't usually think of the poor, the meek, the lowly, those who hunger for righteousness, the persecuted as blessed, as

overcome with good fortune. With most people I tend to think that to be rich, to have a good time, to be powerful and free of pain and persecution is to be happy. As I let these words echo within me I sense what a stranger I am to Jesus and have to admit that his vision scares me. It might cost too much. Yet even in the midst of this fear something draws me. This vision frightens me, to live in it would turn my world inside out and upside down, but it also catches my heart and I somehow know that my heart will always be restless until I live in the beatitudes. As this seeps into me I begin to wonder: what was Jesus like that he could say such things. What was his sense of reality, for that was what lay behind the beatitudes and all of his words and actions that so scandalized many of the people who met him? If I could discover that, even more, if I could enter into that viewpoint, the viewpoint of Jesus, then the beatitudes and the parables and the disturbing actions of Jesus might turn out to make great sense, and my heart might be at peace.

The gospels seem to point to Jesus' baptism. Something seems to have happened there that changed his life. He never again went back to his former life as the carpenter at Nazareth. Further, Mark 11:28-33 also seems to bring us back to the baptism. When Jesus is asked, "By what authority are you doing these things?" the immediate reference is the cleansing of the temple, but in a sense it also refers back to all the things he has done and said. And his counter-question, whether the baptism of John was from God or not, is not an evasion. He is implying that his authority rests on what happened to him when he was baptized in the Jordan.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the

Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:9-11).

As you pray this over again and again, what dawns in your heart is that at his baptism Jesus had an overwhelming experience of being accepted by God his Father. In a completely unearned, and seemingly unexpected way the spirit of God filled Jesus. Who was Jesus? He was the Beloved of his Father. As these words sink into my heart I start to marvel at the gift that this was. Jesus did not have to earn this; he could not lose it. The Father just loved him; and that love was unconditional. This is so different from what we usually meet. "I'll love you if . . ." or "I'll love you because . . ." Here it is simply, "You are my Beloved." That's who Jesus was; and as I hear this I also begin to recognize that that's who I need to be. I can only be my true self when I am Jesus, when I am the beloved of the Father. In a way I had never guessed, but in a way that has always haunted me, Jesus is who I desperately need to be. This comes crashing in on me as I go back to the text and let it wash over me.

Beyond anything Jesus had to earn or merit, the Father has graciously revealed himself to his Son; and there are absolutely no conditions on this gift of the Father's acceptance and love. Because of the Father's unbounded goodness, he loves his son and at the baptism this seems to have dawned on Jesus in a new way. This seems to open up to us the deep significance of Jesus' calling God *Abba*. The word has a long history,¹ but at the time of Jesus it was used by little children in addressing their fathers. The English "daddy" comes close to meaning the same thing. Even adults came to use it of their beloved and respected fathers. But this most intimate form of address was not used by Palestinian Jews as a form of address to God. It would have

sounded disrespectful, even presumptuous to Jesus' contemporaries. Indeed, "*we do not have a single example of God being addressed as abba in Judaism, but Jesus always addressed God in this way in his prayers.*"² The uniqueness of Jesus' way of addressing God brings us to the very heart of his religious experience and vision. He could approach his Father with a sense of absolute and unquestionable trust and intimacy. He spoke to the Father with the simplicity and directness of a little child, freely accepting his dependence on the Father, in the full assurance of his unconditional love. Indeed, we see him exulting in this.

I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matthew 11:25-27).

This clearly brings out the personal aspect of Jesus' intimacy with the Father. It also starts to speak of his mission, which flowed out of his union with the Father.

From the time of his baptism Jesus seems to have been conscious that he was authorized to proclaim the good news of the Father's unbounded love. What had happened in him was the true destiny of all reality. Everyone, all of creation, had to know the Father's love and come alive in it. This Kingdom of God, where the loving concern of the Father would break forth, was at hand. It was just around the corner. In fact, it had already begun in Jesus. But how was he to respond to the gift of the Father and share this with others?

The spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him. (Mark 1:12)

The Spirit that anoints Jesus at the baptism, that overwhelms him with his Father's love, immediately drives him out into the wilderness of temptation and decision. How should he respond? There was no going back to Nazareth as a carpenter; but where should he go? If unconditional acceptance was the gift of the Father, purity of heart was Jesus' response. Jesus was pure of heart in the sense that he was totally simple. He found his sense of security, his identity, his reality in his Father's love and in nothing else. He did not, then, have to try to live off power, or wealth, or comfort, or prestige, or pleasure, or his good name. The love of the Father alone sufficed. The love of the Father was enough, gracious and life giving beyond measure. The desert makes clear that if you try to seek security in anything other than the Father's love you are ultimately trapped in idolatry. You *believe* in that thing. You expect, you hope, that it will make you real. Jesus did not do that. He loved the Father with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind. He took the first commandment literally. He seems to have believed in the love of his Father so much that he didn't have to look for something else to keep him going.

This trust in the Father alone determined how he would proclaim the good news of the Father's Kingdom. In the way he lived and in his preaching, Jesus invited men to prepare for the Kingdom: to repent, to trust in his Father and in that get a first glimpse of what was coming. But he did that in purity of heart.

As things worked out that entailed his leaving behind home, family, comfort, reputation, physical integrity and safety as he took the place of the now imprisoned man who had called him to his baptism (Mk. 1:14-15). At the heart of this was his choice to rely on his Father and not at all on his own power or influence. This is the point of the temptations

in Luke 4:1-13 and the reason for the stern rebuke to Peter and the other disciples in Mark 8:30-33. Before he left the desert Jesus chose to proclaim the Kingdom in purity of heart. You can see this in the way he treats everyone he meets. The Kingdom was the Father's gift and Jesus seems to have handed over both the fruit of his mission and the means he would use in it to his Father as he wrestled in the desert. It would be the Father's work from beginning to end, caused by the miracle of his love, and by nothing else.

It is one thing to do this before embarking on such a mission, when one can hope and pray that this ultimate simplicity will bear fruit. It is something else again to still be trusting as that mission collapses about you. This leads us to a contrast that is implicit in the gospel stories, but which brings to light a crucial ingredient: the deepening character of purity of heart. The contrast is between Judas and Jesus. As you read over the gospels it begins to be clear that as Jesus' mission collapsed, Judas and Jesus had to deal with fundamental decisions. The story that both had been living, each in his own way, of setting out with God to bring the Kingdom, becomes a story of surrender to the mysterious Kingdom God is creating beyond anything man can understand or experience. At this point Judas cracks. He cannot trust that much. On the other hand Jesus says, "Yes, even here: especially here." That surrender was interpreted in the symbols Jesus had at hand. As everything collapsed around him, Jesus took the great symbols of his tradition and interpreted his life in terms of them. There was a new exodus taking place in his passage; and his blood would somehow be the blood of a new covenant (Mk. 14: 22-25). This interpretation seems to have allowed Jesus to glimpse the deep mystery of the Father's love that was working itself out in the harsh facts of his life. Purity of heart grew deeper.

In the last crisis of his life, Jesus is engulfed in darkness. He prays; but now it is very dark. The darkness of sin and terror the massive evil that grips the world, crowds in on him. Jesus prays in the darkness of the Mount of Olives and the Father seems so silent. Beyond what he can understand, beyond the support his followers give him, Jesus chooses to trust in his Father. The Father is gracious beyond measure even in the darkness of the garden. This trust is most stark on the cross. Abandoned by all, when the whole thing is in shambles, and when the Father does not seem close, Jesus still, with rock-like fidelity, proclaims the Father's gracious reign. In his death agony he begins that great prayer of faith rising out of the very verge of despair. He prays Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Purity of heart is pushed to the extreme. In his passion and death Jesus had to choose his Father at a much more radical level than he could ever have done before. He had to reach out to the Father in purity of heart as everything else went. This is crucial. When Jesus gave up control of his actions, when he handed over the fruits of his work as a preacher to the Father, that entailed purity of heart. It was an expression of it. Purity of heart could be seen as operative in his life. But when he dies on the cross, it is not just another expression of purity of heart. The very ultimacy of that action makes manifest that purity of heart was the whole meaning of his life. When Jesus chose the Father from the cross he reached out to him as everything else went, even the experience of the Father. There was no psychic resource, no facet of his spirit, no fiber of his body that was not involved in that choice: God alone. In a very real sense Jesus became his act of trust in the Father.

In his symbolic actions and in his words Jesus was constantly inviting others to come over and share in his

relationship to his Father. The twelfth chapter of Luke is just one example of this. Jesus is talking about fear.

Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more they can do (v. 4)

Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on (v. 22)

Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms . . . (v. 32-33)

It seems that most people really don't believe what Jesus is saying here. Indeed, as I take these words into my heart I find I scarcely believe them, for I am afraid. I find it so hard to believe what Jesus himself believed, what was revealed to him at his baptism, namely that the Father really does love us with an unconditioned love. Because so many of us don't live with a deep sense of this, we must seek our security somewhere else. Most people seem to live with the lurking fear that the universe doesn't care about them, and that one day it will collapse on them and snuff them out without ever noticing or caring. Further, the life experiences of many people only reinforce this brooding sense of vulnerability. This is the primordial terror. To live with it, and with our concomitantly diminished sense of ourselves, we move out to things and to other people, to do exactly what Jesus is warning us against in this passage. We worry about a whole raft of things, for our insecurity, our fear and our alienation bind us into a rapacious possessiveness as we desperately attempt to cover over our terror.

Out of my desperation comes a series of false hopes. If I am beautiful, if I can be witty, then they will notice me. At least part of the universe will pay attention to me. I will not be so alone.

If I can surround myself with comfort, with security, I will hide in it. At least for a while I will feel safe.

If I drench myself with pleasure, either booze, or drugs, or sex, or whatever, then for a while I will make this frightening universe serve me, care about me. I can lose my terrified self in that pleasure.

The litany could go on and on; and it would have to deal with money, power, control. But the point is always the same. Deeply anxious, aware that I am not all that I need to be, and terrified by an uncaring universe, I go out to manipulate what I can of that universe. I try to make it serve me, pay attention to me. I try to twist, control, manipulate. But it doesn't work. It does not bring real peace, for it is only a momentary escape; and I know it. Slowly I learn that even this fleeting promise is a delusion. The lurking terror remains: it will collapse on me as I fear.

But, if a man could believe that the universe was on his side, if he could really experience what Jesus is talking about in the gospel stories—that there is nothing to fear because his Father loves us—would that not transform his life? I think it would. Such a man would still go out to people and to things, but now the motive would be changed. It would no longer be desperation that would drive him but compassion. If a man really came to believe this, he would have to let everyone know what he now knew: we are not alone for the Father loves us. Such a transformation of terror into compassion would free a man to love his world and the people in it in a startlingly new way. Indeed, if I could believe what Jesus says to me here in Luke's gospel that I, too, am the Father's beloved, my life would come to resemble the transformed life I see him living on the pages of the gospels.

This invitation comes through in story after story.

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large

sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."
(Mark 12:41-44)

As we listen to this simple story the great faith of the woman confronts us. As Mark carefully presents this story, he emphasizes that she is a poor widow, someone for whom all the normal human supports are lacking or have been taken away. Then she gives both coins. She could have given one, kept the other for herself, and still have been enormously generous. But she gives away all, committing herself completely to God's mercy. As we listen the invitation to live with the same simplicity haunts us.

You can see this in reverse in Mark 10:17-28. The rich young man is quite good, but his heart is divided. His needs bind him to his riches. Without them life is not just difficult, it is unimaginable. When Jesus invites him to give away his wealth and learn to trust only in the Father, this turns out to be the one thing he cannot do. That provokes a discussion between Jesus and his disciples, during which two very different senses of reality are manifested. Because Jesus is liberated by his knowledge of the Father's love, he does not need to seek his security in wealth or power. But this is not yet true for the rich young man or for the disciples. They cannot see what Jesus sees, that these are only phantoms which promise safety, reality, depth of life to those who are trapped in their own needs. They cannot deliver. There is really nothing there. They cannot give life. Ultimately there is only the Father's love. At the end of the dialogue, Jesus concludes by saying that only a miracle of God's love can free a man to see this. A miracle like his own baptism? In

any case, the parables, and the eating with sinners, his unconventional behavior, all seem to be occasions for this miracle. They challenge and reverse the human way of looking at reality and open up a frightening but incredibly rich world of graciousness. It is frightening because if I really listen to Jesus my human and egocentric world collapses. It is gracious because that opens up to me the world God creates. With the startling strangeness of these words and deeds, the idols I have made for myself and my selfish needs begin to crack and collapse. The word, which is really the Word of God, breaks through on me to rearrange my whole way of life. In a flash, in that crumbling of a whole way of viewing reality, the Word of God ceases to be a word unheard.

This word that echoes within me is Jesus' word inviting me to enter into and share in his stance toward reality. It is this stance that lies behind the beatitudes. One's stance toward reality seems to be determined by what one cares about. The love Jesus experienced as coming to him as an unconditional gift from his Father enabled him to care about all reality. He wanted the rest of reality to know what he knew: that there was nothing to fear. To come, then, to care about all of reality, to become universally compassionate, to be able to mourn with those in sorrow; to be meek with all; to hunger and thirst that all might know the saving righteousness of the Father; to be a peacemaker; would that not mean that one had passed over into the very stance of Jesus? And to be free enough to do that, wouldn't one have to be as free as Jesus was? And would not the source of that liberation have to be the same love of the Father?

Surely living in this way might entail persecution and suffering, as it did with Jesus. Again a passing over. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." But

might not the liberating love of the Father, that was at the very heart of such a stance, fill a man or woman with a deep sense of peace, a peace so deep that no suffering or persecution could take it away? Perhaps then the words of Jesus, "I come to give you peace, a peace that the world cannot give," would take on a new meaning, and be heard as if for the first time. Such a man would be free enough to accept Jesus' invitation to travel with him as he moves through the world and across our lives. He could worry about all reality, feel its pains and compassionately understand its terrors and at the same time be grasped by ultimate serenity because he knew that ultimately there was nothing to fear.

That leaves two beatitudes untouched. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." To be pure in heart means to love one thing. It means that a man or woman is so simple, so free, that they can find all their security in God alone. This is the only adequate response to the Father's unconditional love. To seek your security in another person or thing is to be idolatrous. Even to hedge your bet is to fall into this. The first beatitude that deals with property refers to this, for possessions or any kind of riches can be a danger to purity of heart. This was the case with the rich young man of Mark 10:17-23. Therefore, the man whose life is not cluttered up with many things, who can love with compassion, is free to be pure of heart. As the beatitudes promise, when a man is totally simple, when everything else he could cling to is gone, either given up or burnt away, then he can see God.

¹For background on this see Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*. N.Y.: Scribners, 1971, pp.61-68.

²*Ibid.*, p. 66, italics his.